## CHAPTER VI

### THE FRANCO-GERMAN WAR

Out of each succeeding struggle of the nations, with the disaster and humiliation which overtake one or the other, with the economic crippling and the frightful loss of life, comes at least one new lesson for the world to learn in the grave business of maintaining states. The Franco-German war pointed out for all who would take the pains to notice that war had ceased to be the work of paid adventurers or professional soldiers who fought in the pay of a king or government, but had become instead a stern duty of all the citizens of the country involved, a duty not to be delegated to hirelings but performed in the spirit of self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. One by one the states of the world have made a tardy recognition of the lesson. That Prussia had already known this truth and had profited by it in the organization of her armies was the most weighty reason for her speedy success over the armies of France in 1870. There was no lack of patriotism amongst the French; there was no decay in the physical or moral fiber of the individual Frenchmen; but they were not lessoned in the grim business which they accepted as Napoleon's premier phrased it "with a light heart." Instead, there was the disastrous necessity of learning in the face of the rifles of men who had been long schooled in this essential duty to their country.

The German army evolved by Scharnhorst has already been described, but a few details might well be added. At the time of the Franco-German war, from the young men







arriving at the age of twenty, there were chosen every year 100,000 to form the standing army, where they served for three years. This number formed but a small part of citizens reaching military age, but the essential feature of the system was that service was compulsory and that any one might be chosen. Following the service in the standing army came a second period of four years in the Reserve and a third of five years in the Landwehr — in all twelve years, during some part of which the individual received military training. In addition to these men so trained, the government reserved the right to call to the colors in time of war any able-bodied man from the age of seventeen to that of forty-two. A careful registration was made to account for every man who had seen service, equipment and clothing were kept ready for his use, and orders were issued informing him in detail of his duty when the call for mobilization was issued. The same painstaking care had arranged in time of peace for the mustering of animals, the collecting of food and other supplies, the formation of trains — all to such effect that within a fortnight after the formal declaration of hostilities, the North German Confederation mobilized an army of over a million men and concentrated a full half of them on the Rhine frontier. It was a feat unique in military history.

Across the Rhine a system of conscription prevailed. Alarmed by the Prussian success of 1866, the French, in 1868, had passed a new recruiting law whereby members of the standing armies enlisted for five years and later formed a Reserve for four years. Military service in France was at first avoidable by payment, and in later years by substitution. But this law had not had time to prove its value. Trained reserves were few and a complete organization had not been worked out for them. The depots which furnished the arms and equipment were large and few in number, so that crowding and confusion in a time of hurry were unavoidable. There were many cases where members of the re-

serves had to travel completely across France to draw their equipment only to return over the same route to join their regiments perhaps only a few miles from their homes. In the standing army, organization into the higher tactical units was rare, and maneuvers were infrequent, so that neither general nor staff officers had had that training which is so essential to the proper performance of their functions. Against Germany's well-trained million, France could put into the field only 567,000. From these must be subtracted the Algerian troops, and those at depots and garrisons. The remainder was 330,000 men.

A comparison of the armament of the two nations shows that whereas France's infantry carried the superior weapon, Germany's artillery was equipped with a more effective field piece. The needle-gun which had performed service for Prussia in two previous wars was markedly inferior to the Chassepôt of the French in range, in rapidity of fire, and in striking power. The former was sighted to 600 meters, the latter to 1200. To offset this French advantage, the German artillery was armed with steel breech-loading guns firing percussion shells of nine and twelve pounds. The French arm was composed of guns of equal caliber, but of the old muzzle-loading type. In addition, the French army placed great confidence in the forerunner of the modern machine gun, the mitrailleuse, which, though upon occasion it did great execution, generally failed to meet the expectations of the French, particularly when it was arrayed against the German field guns.

As we look back at the swift disaster which overtook France, it is hard to believe that no idea of their military inferiority ever entered the minds of her people. Her officers of high rank must have had reports from Germany which told them plainly that in everything which pertains to war they were hopelessly behind their enemy, and her Emperor certainly knew enough of the political situation to be sure that the south German states would join the Northern



Confederation against France, yet neither the one party nor the other gave any intimation of the true state of affairs to the population of the country at large. On the contrary, the generals gave out that the army was in a state of complete readiness, and the Emperor himself outlined an invasion of Germany which involved the neutrality, or rather the inactivity, of Bavaria, Würtemburg, and Baden. No doubt existed in Paris that the war would have a speedy ending. Everywhere was heard the cry "On to Berlin!"

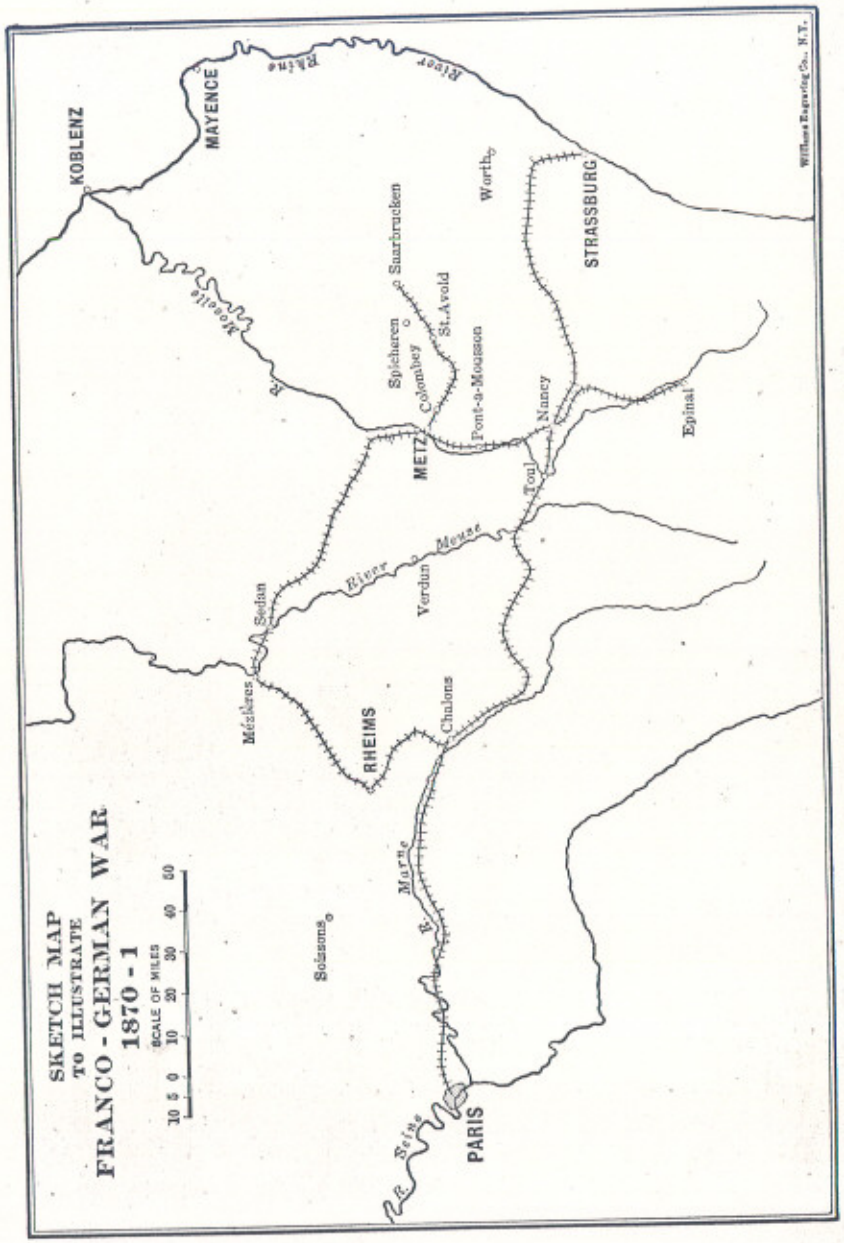
To satisfy the popular demand, activities were begun at once. Seven army corps, totaling 210,000 men, were rushed to the frontier before the mobilization was complete. Staffs had to be formed and skeleton organizations filled in after the troops had reached their station. Indeed, the French army may be said to have mobilized on the frontier. In marked contrast was the German procedure. Each corps was mobilized in its own district and sent to the frontier as a unit, complete in men, animals, and equipment.

The French Army was divided into two wings: the left, composed of the 2d, 3d, 4th, 5th, Guard, and 6th (in reserve) Corps, numbering 163,000 men, was commanded by the Emperor in person; the right, consisting of the 1st and 7th Corps, numbering 47,000 men, was commanded by Marshal MacMahon. These two armies were later added to until in the early days of August they totaled 270,000 men. Their artillery numbered 925 guns. The Emperor's headquarters was at St. Avold in Lorraine, MacMahon's across the Vosges Mountains at Hagenau, in Alsace. The whole army was dispersed irregularly along the frontier from Thionville to Strassburg. Within a few days the impossibility of an aggressive movement became patent to those in command, and the idea of an invasion of Germany was replaced by that of moving the armies along the border in the hope of finding an ideal defensive position. It was the same error which the Austrians committed before Königgrätz — the error of supposing that they could surrender the initiative

without an effort and yet hope to choose the place of the deciding contest.

In response to the restless feeling in Paris, a reconnaissance in force was ordered toward Saarbrück, where the French, greatly superior in numbers, were successful. They were able to take the town, but the victory was of no value to them because in the face of the German armies they could not cross the Saar. Von Moltke in commenting on the action says: "France was waiting for a victory; something had to be done to appease public impatience, so, in order to do something, the enemy resolved (as is usual under such circumstances) on a hostile reconnaissance, and it may be added, with the usual result." The French had struck in the air without accomplishing any result. They had, indeed, launched their only strictly aggressive move of the war. Thereafter the French were concerned not with attacking the enemy's country but with defending their own.

Meanwhile, the Germans mobilized and concentrated on the frontier with but little fear of the French invasion. They knew that should the Emperor lead his troops across the Rhine into South Germany, they would be on his flank and in a position to strike a dangerous blow at his armies. They did fear a vigorous aggressive against their own armies, but it was a feeling that soon passed when they learned of the haphazard way in which France was mobilizing. The Germans were organized into three armies: the First, under General von Steinmetz, consisting of the 1st, 7th, and 8th Corps, numbering 85,000 men; the Second, under Prince Frederick Charles, composed of the 2d, 3d, 4th, 9th, 10th, Guard, and 12th Corps, numbering 210,000 men; and the Third, under the Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia, constituted of the 5th, 6th, and 11th Corps, the 1st and 2d Bavarian Corps, and the Würtemburg and Baden divisions, numbering 180,000 men. Thus against France's 270,000 men and 925 guns were arrayed the German armies of



475,000 and 1584 guns. The First army concentrated on the German right with the Second on its left: they were to invade Lorraine. The Third army was on the left of the line: it was to invade Alsace.

The German plan contemplated as its general objective the city of Paris, but because two French armies lay between him and the French capital, von Moltke did not look beyond his first meeting with those armies. He knew that the capture of Paris, while it would give him an immense moral victory, would not affect the outcome of the war. France's real strength was in her armies. To crush those armies was to paralyze France's resistance and leave the way open to Paris. Von Moltke's special objective, therefore, was the army of the Emperor. He knew of the division into two commands, one in Lorraine, the other in Alsace, and arranged his own forces accordingly. The First army on the right, and the Second on its immediate left, were to oppose Napoleon in Lorraine; the Third army was to operate against MacMahon across the Vosges in Alsace. The orders to all were the same: first defeat the army in front of you, then march on Paris. Viewed thus without the details of the campaign, the plan seems simple. It was simple, but it was successful. The Third army defeated MacMahon at Wörth; the First and Second defeated Napoleon's armies about Metz; portions of all three united to crush MacMahon at Sedan; and the victors of Sedan marched on Paris.

Because the Third army's task of passing through the Vosges Mountains would retard it, and because its route to Paris was the longest, it was put in motion first, on the 4th of August, 1870. Two days later it encountered MacMahon's forces in the first of the great battles of the war, that of Wörth. The French First Corps under MacMahon occupied the heights on the right bank of the Sauer River. Against it before the day was ended was hurled practically all of the 3d German Army. MacMahon attempted to

reënforce by ordering divisions from the 5th and 7th Corps, but only one division arrived in time to assist in the battle. At nightfall the defeated French retired in confusion upon Lunéville, leaving the passes of the Vosges Mountains unguarded, and, except for the fortified towns, abandoning the province of Alsace to the enemy.

On the same day the advancing 1st and 2d German armies encountered the 2d French Corps at Spicheren and in a prolonged action defeated it, although it was later supported by the 3d, 4th, and 5th Corps. The battle was unexpected by the Germans, but the brigade and division commanders hurried their troops to the sound of firing to such good effect that they were able greatly to outnumber the French. This constant arrival of new organizations operated to change the commander of the battle three times during the day, but such was the German organization that no confusion resulted therefrom.

Thus, by night of August 7, the French had been defeated at both ends of their line, their flanks had been pushed back, and their commanders had been thrown into consternation by the double defeat. No plan of resisting the invader seemed possible now other than abandoning the frontier and withdrawing to the line of the Moselle River. The 2d, 3d, 4th, and Guard Corps retreated to Metz where they were joined by the 6th, and the army of MacMahon with the 5th Corps withdrew as far as Châlons, where a new corps, the 12th, was added. Marshal Bazaine replaced the Emperor in executive command of the army of the Rhine.

As soon as von Moltke had reëstablished communications between his armies he gave orders for a general advance on the Moselle, directing the 2d Army (less the 3d Corps) to march on Pont-à-Mousson, and the 1st Army to follow to the right and rear of the 2d. The 3d Corps was to follow the St. Avold-Metz road and maintain touch with the French. On the 10th of August this corps encountered the French army under Bazaine. Von Moltke, knowing



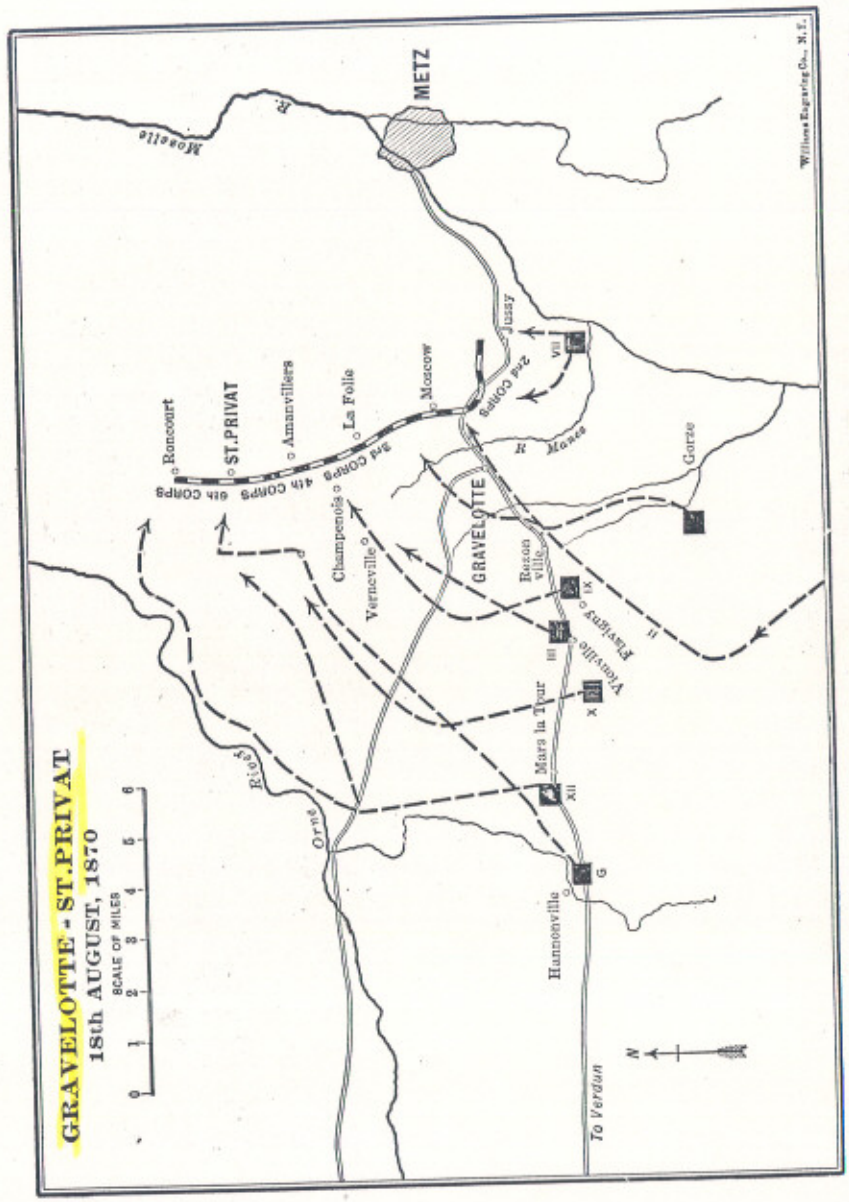
that one corps could not resist an entire army, halted the right of his line and started the remainder on a great wheel toward Metz in the hope of meeting his enemy in a decisive battle. Before these orders could be effected, a sudden retreat of the French caused their revocation, and again the Germans started their march to the Moselle. On August 13, Bazaine once more changed his mind and determined to make a stand in front of Metz. For the second time von Moltke gave the order for the wheeling movement to bring all his troops into action. At Colombey, about four miles east of Metz, contact was established, the French turned to fight, and all day a battle continued in which the Germans barely held their ground. At its conclusion the French withdrew to the cover of the Metz forts.

The battle of Colombey, though really indecisive, left an impression of victory with the Germans. They conceived of their vanquished foe as retreating with all speed upon Verdun, and they pressed forward anxiously to overtake and destroy him. Arrived at the Moselle, on the 15th of August, Prince Frederick Charles ordered General von Alvensleben to march with the 3d Corps on Mars-la-Tour. Here, on the 16th, the unsuspecting corps commander came full on the French army. Hoping to conceal his weakness he made up his mind to attack. All day he forced the issue, and pushed his corps forward. In the afternoon he was supported by portions of the 9th and 10th Corps, but he was still hopelessly outnumbered, and should have been overwhelmed. This was the battle of Vionville-Mars-la-Tour.

In the morning, von Alvensleben's exhausted troops saw the French skirmishers advancing and prepared for what seemed a hopeless resistance. But the French demonstration was only to cover their army's withdrawal. Meanwhile, Prince Frederick Charles, von Moltke, and the King had arrived on the field of battle. Reinforcements were ordered, and the Germans prepared to redeem their strategical

blunder. By the afternoon of the 17th of August, von Moltke was certain that Bazaine had drawn up for battle on the line of St. Privat-Gravelotte, his left flank resting on the fortress of Metz. Had the German chief been opposed by a commander as active and vigorous as himself, he would have been in grave danger. For Bazaine was on the German flank and might have made a swift march to the southeast where, by throwing out flank and rear guards to hold the 1st German army, he might have destroyed von Moltke's lines of communication. This maneuver, successfully carried out, though it might not have affected the result of the campaign, would at least have severely hampered the invader. Bazaine, however, knew that his staff was incapable of this brilliant but difficult feat, and prepared merely for a defensive in front of Metz. And von Moltke, too, knew the French staff so well that he gave no thought to his communications but prepared at once to destroy Bazaine's army.

The marshal had taken up a strong position along a ridge running almost due north from the Moselle. Along the southern half runs the Mance River in a deep wooded ravine. Beyond the source of the Mance the ridge slopes away, open and rolling, toward the Orne. At intervals along the ridge are the villages of Gravelotte, Armanvillers, St. Privat, and Roncourt. The 2d, 3d, 4th, and 6th Corps in order from left to right held the ridge, while the Guard Corps was held in reserve behind the left of the line. This disposition was the weakness of Bazaine's position. His left was naturally strong, but because of small engagements on that flank on the afternoon of the 17th, he feared for that portion of his line, and in consequence left the right in the air. Had he placed his cavalry there in support, or had the 6th corps been furnished with tools wherewith to entrench, the outcome of the battle would unquestionably have been different. Von Moltke himself recognized this fact when he spoke of the position as being "almost impreg-



nable," and he saw too that this weakness on the right made success possible, for he says, "the French left wing could not be shaken even by the most devoted bravery and the greatest sacrifices." But even with success for Bazaine in the battle, unless it was followed by the utter rout of the Germans — an improbable contingency — the strategic victory was von Moltke's, for he had maneuvered the French into a position where he stood between them and their capital, and from which retreat was impossible, once they had accepted the challenge to fight.

At noon on the 18th of August, the 9th German Corps opened the battle by an attack on the French line at Verneville. Von Moltke's cavalry reconnaissance had not determined the extent of the hostile line and it was believed that the right of Bazaine's army was at Armanvillers. The error was soon discovered, the 10th and Guard corps were deployed on the left of the 9th, while the 12th Corps was given the task of trying to turn the French right. It was not until four in the afternoon that the Germans learned that Roncourt was the extreme flank, whereupon the 12th corps had to be sent still farther north. At five o'clock, the commander of the German Guard Corps, fearing that darkness would leave the battle undecided, began an attack on the 6th French Corps at St. Privat. At first he was repulsed with a loss of 6000 men in ten minutes, but almost immediately the artillery of the 9th and 10th Corps centered on St. Privat, and, timing his advance with that of the attack on Roncourt by the 12th Corps, the guard commander made a second attempt on St. Privat, and this time pushed home his assault. The successful capture of St. Privat and Roncourt crumpled the 6th French Corps, which fell back into disarray, leaving the flank of the 4th Corps unprotected. Though firing kept up on the left of the French line, where the French had easily held their positions, the collapse of the 6th Corps meant the ending of the battle.

Under cover of the night Bazaine withdrew his forces

within the walls of the fortress at Metz, and when morning broke, though his troops were safe for the time being, they had ceased to exist as a mobile army. Von Moltke at once formed the Guard, 4th and 12th Corps and two cavalry divisions (in all 90,000 men) into the 4th Army or Army of the Meuse, with which he immediately set out in pursuit of Marshal MacMahon. The remaining seven corps were left under Prince Frederick Charles to invest the fortress of Metz.

Meanwhile, MacMahon had assembled his army of four corps at Châlons. Here in a conference with the Emperor (who had left Bazaine before Gravelotte-St. Privat) it was decided to march the army to Paris and prepare for the defense of the capital. Immediately after Bazaine's disaster there came a peremptory demand from Paris in the name of the Empress that an advance be made toward Metz for the purpose of relieving Bazaine's army. There were many things to influence Marshal MacMahon's decision. He knew that the Crown Prince's army was advancing on Paris. If he should meet and defeat it, his success would only check the Germans temporarily, and he ran the great danger of being himself annihilated. If he should retreat on Paris, he would then have the best opportunities for a successful encounter with the enemy, but such a course would mean the abandoning of Bazaine's army to its fate, and it would ensure the overthrow of the Napoleon dynasty by the now infuriated Parisians. Politics rather than military necessity carried the day, and MacMahon started toward Metz.

His route of march was determined by a communication from Bazaine to the effect that he hoped to break through the hostile investing lines around Metz, and make his way to Paris by way of Montmédy. The Germans were not certain of MacMahon's exact position, but they knew that he had abandoned Châlons for Rheims and accordingly the latter town was selected as their objective. On the



afternoon of August 25 they received definite information that he was moving eastward, apparently to succor Bazaine, and accordingly von Moltke issued orders which changed the front of the advancing 3d and 4th armies from west to north. A decisive battle was imminent and von Moltke meant to have all the troops available to insure a victory. Steadily MacMahon continued his march, urged on by insistent demands from Paris. Wrong though he was in heeding them, one must not use them to account for all his mistakes. A great factor in his defeat was that he employed only one cavalry division for reconnaissance and that on his northern flank, when he and every private in his army knew that the enemy was on the southern flank. Efficient cavalry employed on the right could have foretold his ultimate defeat.

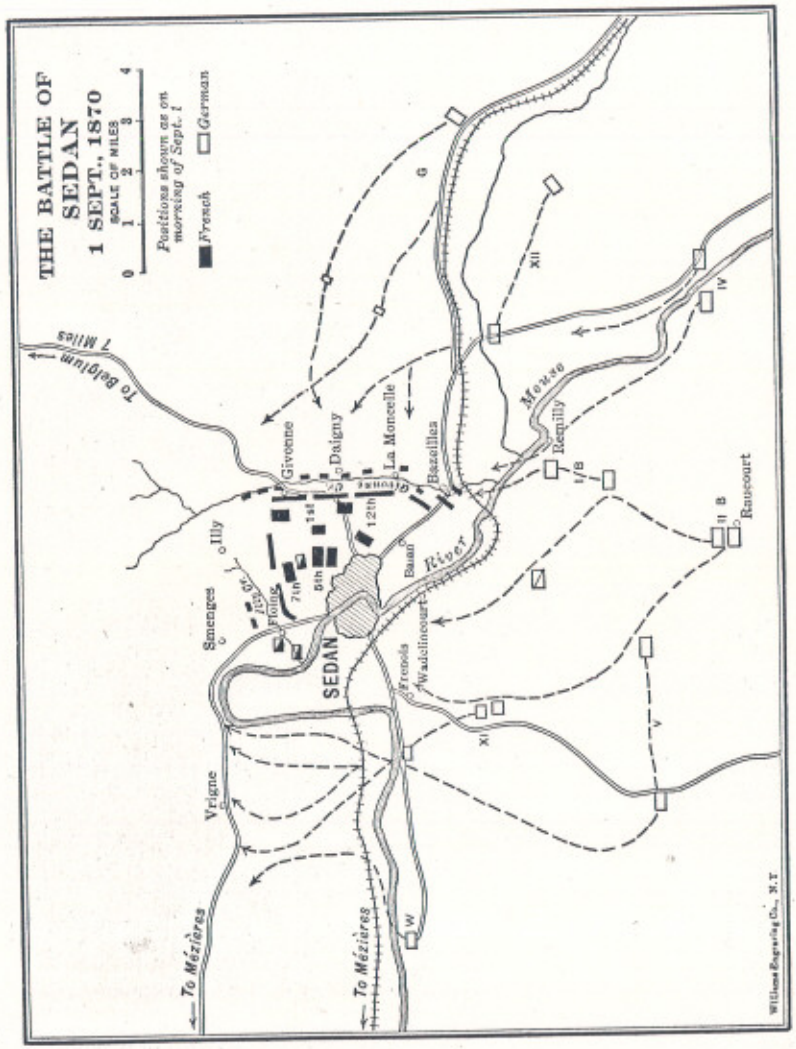
The two armies came together on August 29 in a minor engagement at Nouart, and on the following day the 5th French Corps at Beaumont was surprised and badly beaten by the Army of the Meuse. MacMahon, learning at last that his continued march to Metz was impossible, began a hasty retreat down the Meuse, the Germans close behind him. His route lay toward Sedan, a fortress town only seven miles from the Belgian frontier. With a neutral country to the north and the German armies to the southeast, south, and southwest, there was only one avenue of escape from Sedan, the northwestern route by way of Mezières. There was desultory fighting all day of August 31, and nightfall found MacMahon's troops clustered around Sedan, anxiously awaiting the action of the morrow which was destined to be the last.

Von Moltke laid his nets with his customary skill. The 3d Army was ordered to move to the westward to prevent the withdrawal by way of Mezières. The Army of the Meuse was given the task of the direct attack. Specifically, the corps orders were as follows: for the 3d Army, the 11th Corps to move on Vrigne and later to deploy on the line

St. Menges-Fleigneux; 5th Corps to follow and join the 11th; 1st Bavarian Corps to cross the Meuse and take up a position before Bazeilles; 2d Bavarian Corps to occupy the heights of Wadelincourt and Frenois, and shell the enemy from the rear: for the Army of the Meuse, 4th Corps to take up a position in front of La Moncelle; 12th Corps to prolong its line north past Daigny; Guard Corps to move toward Givonne, and connect with the 11th or 5th Corps (3d army) as soon as possible.

The battle field in shape is a rough triangle with the Meuse river for its base, and the ravines of Illy and Givonne Creeks for sides. Along the banks of these creeks were the defensive positions which the French took up on the night of August 31, the 12th Corps from Bazeilles to Daigny, the 1st on its left as far as Givonne, the 7th on the Illy between the village of that name and Floing. The 5th Corps was held in reserve close to the fortress. Opposite all of these positions there is high ground suitable for attacking artillery, and the approaches to them give plenty of cover. Both of the French lines were in strong natural positions, with good cover for reserves, but without sufficient depth—a slight reversal crowded them back upon the fortress of Sedan.

At half-past four on the morning of September 1, the 1st Bavarian Corps began the attack on Bazeilles, and shortly thereafter the 4th Corps took up the attack in front of Moncelle and Daigny. Marshal MacMahon was seriously wounded in the attack on Moncelle, and upon leaving the field turned over the command to General Ducrot. The new commanding officer scented defeat and at once ordered a withdrawal of the 1st and 12th Corps. As this movement was being undertaken, the command again changed hands, passing this time to General Wimpffen, who immediately countermanded the order and directed a renewal of the fight. The struggle for Bazeilles was continued, but before noon the French were obliged to abandon it and withdraw on Balan. At the same time the Prussian



Guard Corps joined hands with the 5th German Corps to the north of Sedan, whereupon the attack upon the Illy, which had been steadily growing hotter, became overpowering, and little by little the 7th French Corps was forced back toward Sedan.

The German ring about the French army was now complete. Hope of retreating by way of Mezières had long been given up and as the afternoon wore away the approaching disaster became more and more apparent. By three o'clock the Emperor was in favor of surrendering in order that lives might be saved, for he knew now that the struggle was hopeless. General Wimpffen, however, representing the hot- and empty-headed war ministry in Paris, would not hear of such a course, and, gathering what men he could, tried to force a way through the German lines to the southeast. The attempt was brave, but suicidal. It met, as it could meet, only with failure, and the French hoisted the white flag in token of complete surrender. The following day they signed the capitulation which gave to the Germans 80,000 prisoners. Among them was the Emperor of France.

The battle of Sedan broke the backbone of French resistance. Wörth, Spicheren, Gravelotte, Sedan coming in quick succession had paralyzed one army and destroyed the other. Bazaine, surrounded by the enemy in Metz, could be depended upon for no further assistance. His opportunity of breaking out had long gone by, if indeed it had ever existed. In Strassburg, in Toul, in Belfort, other French forces were held immobile by the troops of King William. In various parts of France frenzied efforts were being made to raise and equip armies wherewith to continue resistance, but the attempt was a tardy one. Catastrophe had already overtaken France. Von Moltke had accomplished the first part of his plan, the destruction of the opposing armies, and was now ready to undertake the second part. Sedan had cleared the road to Paris.

The German armies now advanced on the capital, encountering only one check in the shape of Vinoy's corps which had reached Sedan too late to take part. The city was reached on September 19. The defeat of General Ducrot's forces near Versailles left the Germans free to invest Paris, and within two days they had arranged their troops for the approaching siege. The capitulation within a few days of Toul and Strassburg, the former an essential point on the line of communications, left the roads clear from Paris to Berlin, and at once von Moltke began moving material for the siege. Late in October the surrender of Metz, with all the armies and supplies contained in it, assured the safety of the armies before Paris, and left von Moltke free to give his attention to the besieged city.

There is not space here to give the details of the siege. General Trochu, who commanded the defenders, had 400,000 men in his forces, but they were mostly raw undisciplined recruits of a revolutionary type; several times they were on the edge of revolt. Over such as these the trained German troops had an immense superiority which they maintained throughout the siege. Despite the many gallant sorties and the heroic work of her defenders, Paris was unable to rid herself of her enemy, and on January 27, 1871, agreed on an armistice, which ended in capitulation.

Outside in several quarters of France was being waged the "People's War" directed by the indefatigable Gambetta. But these armies, too, were "pushed raw to the battle," and one by one came to melancholy ends. Never was a braver resistance than was made by these citizen armies of France, but never was a more hopeless one. When Paris fell, hope for France died, and reluctantly the people gave up the struggle and turned their attention to bearing the burden imposed upon defeated France.

Bismarck's politics can receive no clearer illustration than by comparing the actions of the victorious armies in Vienna in 1866 and in Paris in 1870. Austria, whom he



desired as an ally, was spared the humiliation of having a conquering army march through her capital. But the French, whom he designed to humiliate as deeply as possible, were forced to see the triumphant battalions marched through the streets of Paris, and to feel as Jugurtha must have felt when, to grace a triumph, he was forced to parade in chains through the streets of Rome. Every effort was made to sooth Austria: every effort was made to irritate France. The success was complete, for within a few years Austria was joined in close alliance to her former enemy, and in France there was apparent that growing hatred which at last culminated in the horror of 1914.